

LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE & FISHERIES
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Waterfowl Population Estimates
in Louisiana's Coastal Zone Below
U.S. Highway 90 and on Catahoula Lake

Date: Coastal Zone: Dec. 8-10
Catahoula Lake: Dec. 10
NE LA: Nov. 19, Dec. 14
NW LA: Nov. 13, Dec. 17
Scaup: Dec. 17

December 17, 2015

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Estimates made from Aircraft

SPECIES	SOUTHWEST	SOUTHEAST	CATAHOULA LAKE	TOTALS
MALLARD	46,000	4,000	1,000	51,000
MOTTLED	16,000	20,000		36,000
GADWALL	440,000	366,000	1,000	807,000
WIGEON	5,000	10,000	**	15,000
GW TEAL	251,000	52,000		303,000
BW TEAL	68,000	44,000	**	112,000
SHOVELER	142,000	9,000	**	151,000
PINTAIL	14,000	31,000	1,000	46,000
TOTAL DABLERS	982,000	536,000	3,000	1,521,000
SCAUP	74,000	109,000	**	183,000
RINGNECKED	171,000	639,000	37,000	847,000
CANVASBACK	7,000	36,000	43,000	86,000
TOTAL DIVERS	252,000	784,000	80,000	1,116,000
TOTAL DUCKS	1,234,000	1,320,000	83,000	2,637,000
COOTS	287,000	908,000	18,000	1,213,000

**Estimate is less than 1,000

COMMENTS:

The 2.64 million ducks estimated on this survey is over twice the November survey total of 1.21 million, is 18% lower than last December's total of 3.20 million, and is slightly higher than the most

recent 5-year (2.40 million) and long-term (2.55 million) averages. Despite relatively mild weather in the Mississippi Flyway, a significant migration occurred between the November and December surveys. The biggest change from November was the big influx of ring-necked ducks, especially in SE LA, but estimates for all migratory species increased from November except blue-winged teal and pintails. However, the mallard estimate of 51,000 is the lowest on record for December, and all dabbling ducks except shovelers are below long-term December averages while scaup, ringed-necked ducks, and canvasbacks are well above long-term averages.

Unlike November, when duck numbers were skewed toward SW Louisiana, large increases in gadwalls and ring-necked ducks in SE Louisiana generated a more even distribution between the 2 surveyed regions. Ducks were distributed across transect lines in SW Louisiana, and few large concentrations were noted. Only at Lacassine NWR and on the open water of White Lake were big concentrations seen. Ducks of all species, but dominated by gadwalls, ring-necked ducks, green-winged teal and shovelers, were rafted up in huge numbers on the western side of White Lake, but are not included in the statistically-expanded estimate. It is unclear if they were new migrants, or birds using the open water as refuge from hunting that had not yet redistributed to nearby wetlands in the 2 days after the season closed. In SE Louisiana, a large concentration of gadwalls was seen on Delta Farms south of Lake Salvador, and very large numbers of ring-necked ducks were counted in the marshes of upper Terrebonne Parish. Those 2 locations drove the big increase in the total duck estimate in SE Louisiana because fewer ducks were seen in the marshes east of Venice compared to the November survey.

Habitat conditions in coastal Louisiana continue to be above average. A small loss of flooded agricultural habitat in the agricultural regions was noted as some draining and drying has occurred since the November survey, but overall there is abundant habitat. Water levels in SW marshes are lower than in November in most areas but remain higher than optimum for foraging waterfowl. However, good submerged aquatic (SAV) growth could still be seen in many locations with substantial seed-producing habitat in higher marsh still shallowly-flooded. In SE Louisiana, water levels appeared lower in many locations, and good to excellent SAV was noted.

At Catahoula Lake, water levels were above management targets and rising due to precipitation and rising river levels. Diving ducks increased from 10,000 in November to 80,000 on this survey, but dabbling ducks declined from 13,000 in November when water levels were even higher, to just 3,000 on this survey. These counts are very similar to last December when 8,000 dabblers and 74,000 divers were counted, and the December 2013 survey, when 5,000 dabblers and 71,000 divers were counted.

In NE Louisiana, the traditional cruise survey of selected habitats standardized in 2005 was conducted in November and December. In November, 240,000 ducks but only 36,000 (62% white-fronted geese) were counted with major concentrations of ducks seen in the flooded agricultural fields south of Grand Cote NWR, east of Ouachita WMA, between Bonita and Mer Rouge, and south of Vidalia in Concordia Parish. Gadwall (85,000), pintail (53,000), green-winged teal (40,000) and shovelers (36,000) were the most abundant species. This NE November survey count is the second highest since 2005, well above the 139,000 counted last year, and much higher than the 10-year November average of 135,000. However, the 36,000 geese were the fewest on record for this survey. Habitat conditions were very good across the survey area with far above average amount of flooding in the agricultural regions and water in nearly all backwater and forested wetland habitats.

In December, the survey crew counted 363,000 ducks and 199,000 geese (89% snow geese) on the same selected habitats, which was a 50% increase in ducks and over 6 times the number of geese seen in November despite relative mild weather in the Mississippi Flyway. Gadwalls (134,000), green-winged teal (77,000), mallards (65,000) and pintails (47,000) were the most abundant species, and this total number of ducks is the highest recorded in December since 2005. However, four December surveys in NE LA have been missed or incomplete due to weather, aircraft problems, lack of observers,

or other difficulties since 2005, so comparisons with high, low, or average counts are suspect. Highest concentrations of ducks were again seen in the ag fields south of Grand Cote NWR, between Bonita and Mer Rouge and south of Vidalia in Concordia Parish. Large numbers of geese were also noted near Grand Cote and Bonita/Mer Rouge, but also between the Ouachita River and Bayou Lafourche south of Bosco. Contrary to the November survey, snow geese made up the overwhelming majority of geese on this survey. Habitat conditions remain above average, but observers noted a noticeable decline in the amount of shallow flooding in some agricultural areas.

In November, we counted 6,000 ducks on the northwest Louisiana survey, primarily on the locks, lakes, oxbows, and fields along the Red River and upper Toledo Bend reservoir. This is slightly higher than the 5,200 counted in November 2013, less than the 7,900 counted last November, and less than the average of 7,100 since 2005. As in other parts of the state, there was above average flooding in agricultural habitats and pastures and higher water levels in most areas compared to recent years. Observers also noted lower amounts of invasive aquatics on Lakes Bistineau and Wallace than in recent years. Gadwalls and ring-necked ducks were the most abundant species, making up 65% of total duck count. The largest concentrations of ducks were seen between Locks 4 and 5 of the Red River, on the Yates Unit of Red River NWR, and on managed moist-soil impoundments near Loggy Bayou.

On the NW LA survey in December, we counted 9,800 ducks, which is a 63% increase from November and similar to the December average of 10,000 for this survey. The survey crew was unable to complete the last stretch of the Red River between Shreveport and the Arkansas border and Black Lake at Hosston, so the total may be slightly undercounted, but those are not typically high-density survey locations. Observers reported very high water on the Red River, and over-bank flooding had created many pools not normally seen and a different distribution of ducks in those areas than on past surveys. Unlike in November, canvasbacks were the most abundant species (2,700) followed by gadwalls (2,000) and scaup (1,800). Highest numbers of ducks were counted on Caddo Lake, the Red River from Lock 5 to Shreveport, and managed moist-soil impoundments near Loggy Bayou.

Lastly, in December and January, LDWF conducts a scaup survey on Lakes Maurepas, Pontchartrain, and Borgne. On today's survey, 77,700 scaup were estimated including 77,300 on Lake Pontchartrain and 400 on Lake Borgne. That estimate is higher than the 53,000 from December 2014, but is only 40% of the most recent 5-year average of 194,300. The relatively low number of scaup on the lakes is in contrast to above-average numbers estimated on the coastal transects in coastal Louisiana. Observers reported scaup were scattered in smaller flocks than usual, with few flocks greater than 20 and many single birds. They also noted a lack of buffleheads, which are commonly seen in the thousands.